Fyodor Dostoevsky's Great Grandson comes to India

Report by: Pallav Journo
(www.DatelineDelhi.com)

On 11 November 2025, the Russian Cultural Centre in New Delhi hosted an event of exceptional historical and literary significance. **Alexei Dimitrievich Dostoevsky**, the great-great grandson of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, visited India for the first time and delivered a lecture on the long and complex history of the Dostoevsky family. The event opened with a scholarly presentation by Professor Meeta Narain from the Centre for Russian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), who spoke on "The Psychic Phenomena in the Works of Dostoevsky."

Lecture by Alexei Dimitrievich Dostoevsky

Alexei began by noting that he is the first member of the Dostoevsky lineage ever to visit India, expressing admiration for India's "fantastic and majestic" character.

Origins of the Dostoevsky Lineage

According to Alexei, the Dostoevsky family traces its origins to a Tatar-Mongol noble (a Tatar Murza). In 1504, the ancestor Danila Irtishch converted to Orthodox Christianity and entered the Slavic cultural sphere, settling in what is now Belarus. He established himself in a village named Dosteyvo (sometimes interpreted as meaning "sharp" or "knife"), where the family received a small landed estate.

The early descendants used the surname Irtishchev-Dostoevsky, but subsequent generations adopted solely Dostoevsky. The village still exists in Belarus; Alexei mentioned

that during a recent visit, their family located the stones of the ancestral house.

Over the centuries, the family migrated southward into Vinnytsia Oblast (modern Ukraine), resulting in the Dostoevsky lineage being distributed across Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. The family historically served as priests, both in the Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic tradition.

Mikhail Dostoevsky: From Priesthood to Medicine

Fyodor Dostoevsky's father, Mikhail Andriyevich Dostoevsky, was raised in an Orthodox environment and educated at a seminary. In his final year, he received imperial orders instructing him to pursue medical studies at the Moscow Medical Academy, part of the empire's preparation for large-scale military conflicts, including the Napoleonic Wars. The state funded his education.

After serving for five years—including working with an elite regiment during the Battle of Borodino—Mikhail retired from military service and practiced at the Mariinsky Hospital for the Poor for fifteen years. For his service, he received four official decorations. Health concerns later compelled him to retire, after which he was granted a government apartment. He married Maria Nechayeva, and the couple had seven children.

Childhood of Fyodor Dostoevsky

Mikhail moved the family from Moscow to St. Petersburg so that his sons could pursue education at the St. Petersburg Military Engineering Academy. Only Fyodor succeeded in entering and graduating from this competitive institution.

The brothers arrived in St. Petersburg in the year of Pushkin's death (1837). At ages 15 and 16, they were so deeply moved by this national tragedy that they reportedly swore over

Pushkin's grave that they would devote themselves to literature and never stop writing. For Fyodor Dostoevsky, Alexei observed, his literary personality "began with Pushkin and ended with Pushkin," since his final public speech was delivered at the Pushkin Monument inauguration in Moscow. That address explored the themes "What does it mean to be Russian?" and "What is Pushkin for Russia?"

Though Dostoevsky's life would have been comfortable as a military engineer, he chose the uncertain path of literature because writing was a necessary expression of his inner spirit.

Family Continuity

Fyodor Dostoevsky married Anna Snitkina, with whom he had four children, of whom only two—Lyubov Fyodorovna and Fyodor Fyodorovich—survived into adulthood. Fyodor Fyodorovich became the great-grandfather of Alexei:

Fyodor Fyodorovich → Andrei Dostoevsky → Dmitri Dostoevsky → Alexei Dimitrievich.

Alexei noted that by direct male lineage, only two Dostoevskys remain in the world today:

- Alexei Dimitrievich
- his son, Fyodor Alexeivich
- Alexei also has three elder daughters.

Recommended Reading

Alexei concluded by recommending a major scholarly biography of Dostoevsky by Lyudmila Saraskina (2010). While out of print, the book is available in PDF form and remains essential for understanding the complexity of Dostoevsky's personality and works.

"The Psychic Phenomena in the Works of Dostoevsky": Lecture by Professor Meeta Narain

The event began with the lecture of Professor Meeta Narain from the Centre for Russian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). The theme of her presentation was "The Psychic Phenomena in the Works of Dostoevsky."

Dostoevsky's Importance Across Disciplines

Professor Narain described that Dostoevsky's works are not only important in literature, but also equally important in the fields of language, translation, and culture. His writings reflect various aspects of human existence, and deeply delve into psychology.

Psychic and Occult Phenomena

She stated that various psychic phenomena are reflected in Dostoevsky's novels, including themes associated with occult science. His

works also acquaint readers with the religious aspects of his personality.

Dostoevsky as a Multifaceted Novelist

Professor Narain noted that Dostoevsky was a multifaceted person and a novelist of the Golden Era of Russian culture. She added that Lev Tolstoy and Dostoevsky admired each other, and that Knut Hamsun, the famous Norwegian writer, also admired Dostoevsky.

Religious Influences in Childhood

She explained that Dostoevsky's childhood was deeply influenced by religion. His family belonged to the Orthodox Christian tradition, and young Dostoevsky attended Sunday church services and recited prayers.

Portrayal of 19th-Century Russian Life

According to her, we find the condition of human life in 19th-century Russia in his major novels,

such as Crime and Punishment, The Brothers Karamazov, and Demons.

Writing Under Tsar Nicholas I

She noted that Dostoevsky began serious writing during the period of Tsar Nicholas I, but Tsardom is seldom reflected in his novels.

Each character in his works has a distinctive role to play.

Demonic and Occult Themes

Professor Narain highlighted that demonic themes are reflected in the dialogue between Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov, and that such themes and interests in occult sciences were prevalent in Russian society during the reign of Tsar Alexander I.

These themes also appear in The Brothers Karamazov, especially in Ivan's dream.

Spiritualism and Doubt

She explained that Dostoevsky discussed spiritualism with his peers, and that he sometimes experienced doubts about the existence and non-existence of devils, which is reflected in his story “Bobok.”

Influence of Edgar Allan Poe

She noted that Edgar Allan Poe influenced Dostoevsky very much.

Themes of Love

She stated that Dostoevsky’s works also explore themes of love. She quoted Dostoevsky:

“If there is no God in the mortal soul, there is no love for humanity.”

She explained that his characterisation of love relates to :

- Love towards God, considered the supreme form of love

- Love towards one's father
- Love as expressed in passion

Life Reflected in Works

She said that all incidents of Dostoevsky's life found place in his works, and that themes of existentialism, feudalism, and personalism appear throughout them.

Closing Assessment

She concluded by describing Dostoevsky as the most dynamic novelist of his times and the future, and one who will remain unique for all times.

At the end of her talk, Professor Narain gifted her book "Reading Russian" to Alexei Dimitrievich Dostoevsky.

The event at the Russian Cultural Centre offered an extraordinary intersection of genealogy, literature, psychology, and cultural history. Alexei Dimitrievich Dostoevsky's intimate family narrative, combined with Professor Meeta Narain's academic analysis, created a vivid portrait of Dostoevsky's enduring legacy—both as a historical figure and as a literary titan whose works continue to illuminate the complexities of human nature.